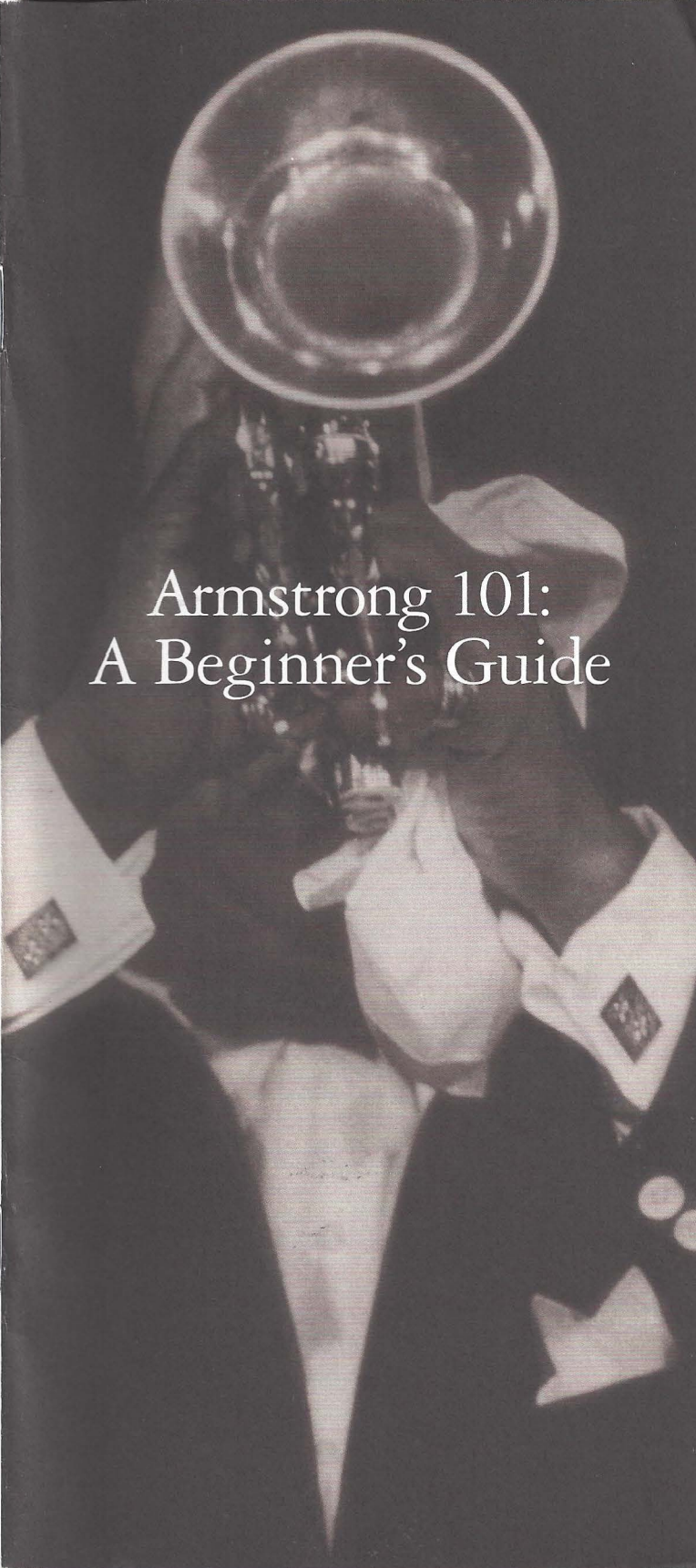


Armstrong 101: A Beginner's Guide



"Now I must tell you that my whole life has been happiness. Through all of the misfortunes … I did not plan anything. Life was there for me and I accepted it. And life, whatever came out, has been beautiful to me, and I love everybody."

—Louis Armstrong

Armstrong 101: A Beginner's Guide

Table of Contents

Introduction 1

The Impact of Armstrong 3

Armstrong: A Brief Biography 5

Suggested Recordings 13

Suggested Reading 15

Additional Resources 17

Jazz at Lincoln Center 19

Created by

Jazz at Lincoln Center

Education Department

33 West 60th Street

New York, NY 10023-7999

(212) 258-9800

www.jazzatlincolncenter.org

Editor: Michele Schroeder,

Education Manager

Introduction

Jazz at Lincoln Center created this publication to provide an introduction to the legendary musician Louis Armstrong. This guide presents an overview of Armstrong's accomplishments and contributions to the past, present, and future of jazz and popular music. Also included are lists of recommended books, recordings, and videos for your further exploration.

Louis Armstrong:

- played the trumpet with an unmatched level of virtuosity
- was the first great jazz soloist
- introduced scat singing to a wide audience
- recorded dozens of jazz and popular music masterpieces
- popularized jazz by transforming pop tunes into jazz standards
- performed in almost every country, spreading the language of jazz around the world
- appeared in over 30 Hollywood films and numerous television shows and radio broadcasts
- wrote two autobiographies, over a dozen magazine articles, and thousands of letters to friends and fans
- made hundreds of tapes in elaborate self-designed boxes that feature hours of his music, jokes, candid conversations, and anecdotes
- performed with the top musicians and entertainers of the 20th century including Sidney Bechet, Bing Crosby, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Dizzy Gillespie, Benny Goodman, Lionel Hampton, Fletcher Henderson, Earl Hines, Billie Holiday, and Frank Sinatra
- taught the world to swing

Armstrong in a publicity photo, ca. 1930





Armstrong with Bing Crosby (above) and Duke Ellington (right)

The Impact of Armstrong

"Louis Armstrong claimed that he was born on the Fourth of July in 1900. True or not, such a birthdate was not only appropriate to the status he achieved as a 20th century American legend, but it is entirely consistent with the crucial role he came to play as the quintessential embodiment of the spirit of his native land as it is expressed in contemporary music." —Albert Murray, *author*

"Louis is jazz in person, he's the creator of our language on the trumpet. It's impossible to say what he means to us... To speak his name is to conjure up our whole world. No sentences. The name is enough."

—Dizzy Gillespie, *trumpeter, composer*

"No matter where he was in the world, from Argentina to Poland, it was the same. People didn't idolize Pops like they idolized a sports figure or rock star. They loved him like he was somebody in their family. He represented a higher humanity in his sound and in his presence. He was the incarnation of soul, and people were warmed by that."

—Wynton Marsalis, *Artistic Director, Jazz at Lincoln Center*



Opposite photo: Frank Driggs Collection / Above photo: Sam Shaw

"Armstrong inspired thousands of trumpeters, inspired countless vocations, enchanted millions of friends who, quite simply, listened. For me he's the epitome of the kind of American who goes beyond the rules, a truly good and original man." —Duke Ellington, *pianist, composer, bandleader*

"No one in jazz ever played with greater emotional range than Armstrong, whose New Orleans experiences meant that he worked everything from christenings to funerals. In the streets, he picked up all the folk chants and bawdy songs. While traveling around town, he heard traces of French and Italian opera that suffused his sensibility and his memory. But beyond all that, what Armstrong wanted to give his listeners was the kind of pleasure music gave him, which is what most artists are after. When he wrote or talked of New Orleans, of being out there with his horn or following the parades or listening to mentors like Joe Oliver, Armstrong never failed to project a joy so profound that it became an antidote to the blues of daily living."

—Stanley Crouch, *author*

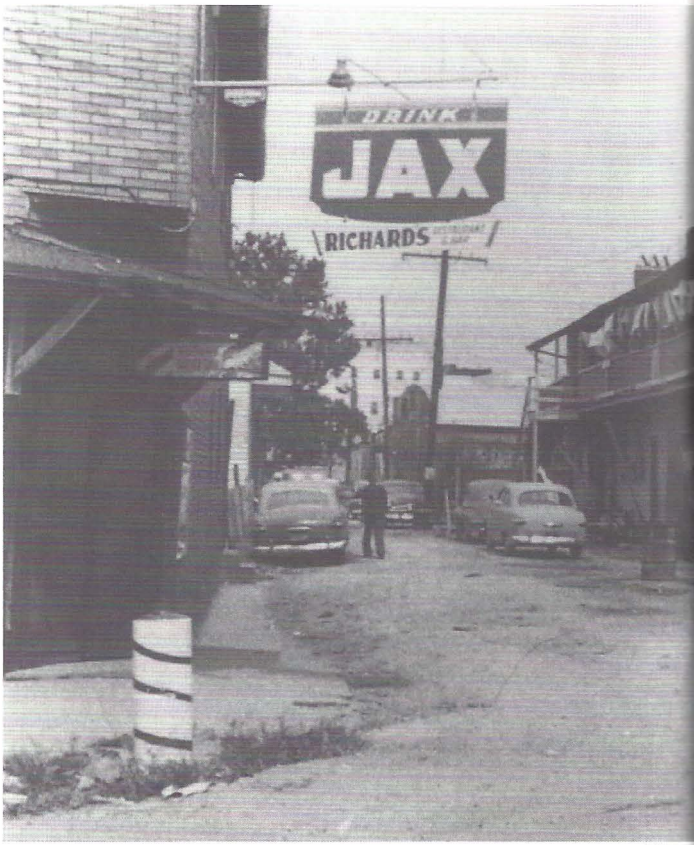
"You can't play anything on the horn that Louis hasn't played, not even modern." —Miles Davis, *trumpeter*

"He is the beginning and end of American music."

—Bing Crosby, *singer*

Louis Armstrong: A Brief Biography

Louis Armstrong was born on August 4, 1901, in New Orleans, Louisiana, the birthplace of jazz. He is considered the most important improviser in jazz, and he taught the world to swing. Armstrong, fondly known as "Satchmo" (which is short for "Satchelmouth" referring to the size of his mouth) or "Pops," had a sense of humor, natural and unassuming manner, and positive disposition that made everyone around him feel good. With his infectious, wide grin and instantly recognizable gravelly voice, he won the hearts of people everywhere. He had an exciting and innovative style of playing that musicians imitate to this day. Throughout his career, Armstrong spread the language of jazz around the world, serving as an international ambassador of swing. His profound impact on the music of the 20th century continues into the 21st century.



Armstrong grew up in a poor family in a rough section of New Orleans. He started working at a very young age to support his family, singing on street corners for pennies, working on a junk wagon, cleaning graves for tips, and selling coal. His travels around the city introduced him to all kinds of music, from the blues played in the Storyville honky tonks to the brass bands accompanying the New Orleans parades and funerals. The music that surrounded him was a great source of inspiration. A born musician, Armstrong had already demonstrated his singing talents on the streets of the city and eventually taught himself to play the cornet. He received his first formal music instruction in the Colored Waif's Home for Boys, where he was allegedly confined for a year and a half as punishment for firing blanks into the air on New Year's Eve.



Above: Armstrong with his mother and sister
Below: Intersection of Jane & Perdido, near Armstrong's childhood home in New Orleans



Courtesy Hogan Jazz Archives, Tulane University



Armstrong (indicated by arrow) and the Colored Waif's Home band

As the young Armstrong began to perform with pick-up bands in small clubs and play funerals and parades around town, he captured the attention and respect of some of the older established musicians of New Orleans. Joe "King" Oliver, a member of Kid Ory's band and one of the finest trumpet players around, became Armstrong's mentor. When Oliver moved to Chicago, Armstrong took his place in Kid Ory's band, a leading group in New Orleans at the time. A year later, he was hired to work on riverboats that traveled the Mississippi. This experience enabled him to play with many prominent jazz musicians and to further develop his skills, learning to read music and undertaking the responsibilities of a professional gig.


Frank Driggs Collection
Joe "King" Oliver

In 1922, Oliver invited Armstrong to Chicago to play second cornet in his Creole Jazz Band. As a member of Oliver's band, Armstrong began his lifetime of touring and recording. In 1924, he moved on to New York City to play with the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra at the Roseland Ballroom. Armstrong continued his touring and recording activities with Henderson's group and also made recordings with Sidney Bechet, Ma Rainey, and Bessie Smith. In 1925, Armstrong returned to Chicago and made his first recordings as a band leader with his Hot Five (and later his Hot Seven). From 1925 to 1928 he continued a rigorous schedule of performing and recording, which included "Heebie Jeebies," the

tune that introduced scat singing to a wide audience and "West End Blues," one of the most famous recordings in early jazz. During this period, his playing steadily improved, and his traveling and recording activities introduced his music to more and more people.

In 1929, Armstrong returned to New York City and made his first Broadway appearance. His 1929 recording of "Ain't Misbehavin'" introduced the use of a pop song as material for jazz interpretation, helping set the stage for the popular acceptance of jazz that would follow. During the next year, he performed in several U.S. states, including California, where he made his first film and radio appearances. In 1931, he first recorded "When It's Sleepytime Down South," the tune that became his theme song. In 1932, he toured England for three months, and during the next few years, continued his extensive domestic and international tours, including a lengthy stay in Paris.



Frank Driggs Collection

Louis Armstrong and His Hot Five

When Armstrong returned to the U.S. in 1935, Joe Glaser became his manager. Not only did Glaser free Armstrong from the managerial battles and legal difficulties of the past few years, he remained his manager for the duration of his career and helped transform Armstrong into an international star. Under Glaser's management, Armstrong performed in films, on the radio, and in the best theaters, dance halls, and nightclubs. He worked with big bands, playing music of an increasingly commercial nature as well as small groups that showcased his singing of popular songs.

In 1942, Armstrong married Lucille Wilson, a dancer at the Cotton Club where his band had a running engagement. The following year, they purchased a home in Corona, Queens, where they lived for the rest of their lives. In 1947, Armstrong formed a small ensemble called the All-Stars, a group of extraordinary players whose success revitalized mainstream jazz. Throughout the 1950s and 60s, he continued to appear in popular films and made numerous international tours, earning him the title "Ambassador Satch." During a trip to West Africa, Armstrong was greeted by more than one hundred thousand people. In the early 1960's, he continued to record, including two albums with Duke Ellington and the hit "Hello Dolly," which reached number one on the Billboard charts. Armstrong performed regularly until recurring health problems gradually curtailed his trumpet playing and singing. Even in the last year of his life, he traveled to London twice, appeared on more than a dozen television shows, and performed at the Newport Jazz Festival to celebrate his 70th birthday. Up until a few days before his death, on July 6, 1971, he was setting up band rehearsals in preparation to perform for his beloved public.



Above: Armstrong relaxes with neighborhood children at his home in the Corona section of Queens, NY

Opposite: Armstrong on stage, ca. 1940

Next spread: Armstrong with Tyree Glenn (top), and in Africa, 1956 (bottom)

Opposite photo: Richard Merrill













Suggested Recordings

compiled by Loren Schoenberg, Artistic Consultant, and Rob Gibson, Executive Producer & Director, Jazz at Lincoln Center

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man [4 CD/4 Cass. Box Set], Columbia-Legacy/Sony, 1923-1934

Highlights from His Decca Years, Grp/UNI, 1924-1958

Hot Fives & Sevens [4 CD Box Set], Columbia-Legacy/Sony, 1925-1930

The Louis Armstrong Collection, Vol. 4: Louis Armstrong and Earl Hines, Columbia-Legacy/Sony, 1927-1928

Louis Armstrong Collection, Vol. 5: Louis in New York, Columbia-Legacy/Sony, 1929

Louis Armstrong Collection, Vol. 6: St. Louis Blues, Columbia-Legacy/Sony, 1929-1930

Louis Armstrong Collection, Vol. 7: You're Driving Me Crazy, Columbia-Legacy/Sony, 1930-1931

Stardust, Columbia-Legacy/Sony, 1930-1932

Complete RCA Victor Recordings, RCA Victor/BMG, 1932-1956

Pocketful of Dreams, Vol. 3, Decca-Grp/UNI, 1935

Rhythm Saved the World, Decca-Grp/UNI, 1935-1936

Heart Full of Rhythm, Vol. 2, Decca-Grp/UNI, 1936-1938

Louis Armstrong Plays W.C. Handy, Columbia-Legacy/Sony, 1954

Satch Plays Fats, Columbia-Legacy/Sony, 1955



The Complete Ella Fitzgerald & Louis Armstrong [3 CD Box Set], Verve/Uni, 1956

I've Got The World On A String, Verve/UNI, 1957

The Complete Louis Armstrong & Duke Ellington Sessions, Roulette, 1961

Disney Songs the Satchmo Way, Disney/UNI, 1968

What A Wonderful World, RCA Bluebird/BMG, 1970

This chronological list of recordings cites the original year of issue. Most of these titles have been reissued in recent years.

Suggested Reading

compiled by Loren Schoenberg and Rob Gibson

Armstrong, Louis, *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans*

Armstrong, Louis; *Swing That Music*

Berrett, Joshua; *The Louis Armstrong Companion*

Boujut, Michel; *Louis Armstrong*

Brothers, Thomas (Editor); *Louis Armstrong, in His Own Words: Selected Writings*

Chilton, John and Max Jones; *Louis, the Louis Armstrong Story, 1900-1971*

Crouch, Stanley; *Notes of a Hanging Judge: Essays and Reviews, 1979-1989*

Giddins, Gary; *Satchmo*

Gottlieb, Robert (Editor); *Reading Jazz: A Gathering of Autobiography, Reportage, and Criticism from 1919 to Now*

Green, Benny; *The Reluctant Art: Five Studies in the Growth of Jazz*

Meckna, Michael; *Satchmo: Louis Armstrong from A to Z*

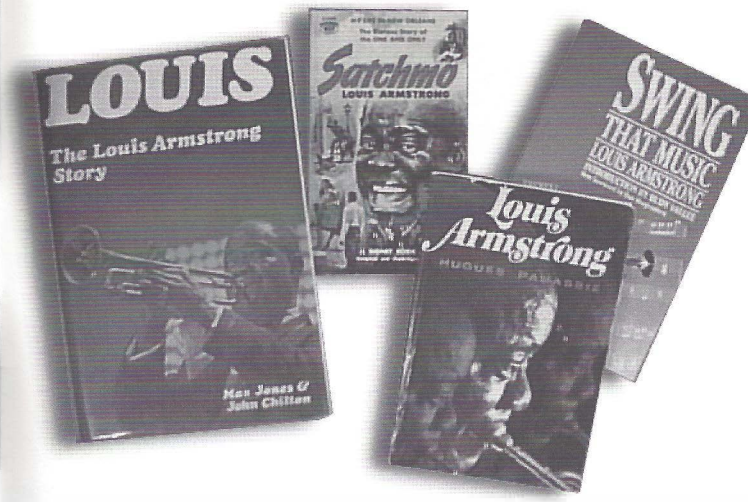
Meryman, Richard; *Louis Armstrong: A Self-Portrait*

Murray, Albert; *Stomping the Blues*

Murray, Albert; *The Blue Devils of Nada: A Contemporary American Approach to Aesthetic Statement*

Panassie, Hughes; *Louis Armstrong*

Williams, Martin; *The Jazz Tradition*



Books for Children and Young Adults

Orgill, Roxane; *If I Only Had a Horn: Young Louis Armstrong*

Schroeder, Alan; *Satchmo's Blues*

Shelf Medearis, Angela; *Little Louis and the Jazz Band: The Story of Louis 'Satchmo' Armstrong*

Tanenhaus, Sam; *Louis Armstrong: Musician*

Videos

available at www.thejazzstore.com or Tower Records

Louis Armstrong, Goodyears of Jazz, Vol. 1.,
Video Artists International, 1962

Satchmo, CMV Enterprises, 1989

Additional Resources

Louis Armstrong
House and Archives
Queens College, CUNY
Flushing, NY 11367
(718) 997-3670
www.satchmo.net

The Louis Armstrong
Educational Foundation
325 East 79th Street
New York, NY 10021

Below: Armstrong with wife Alpha in England / Opposite: Armstrong ca. 1930



America's Jazz Heritage:
A partnership of the
Lila Wallace Reader's
Digest Fund and the
Smithsonian Institution
www.si.edu/ajazzh

Rutgers University
Institute of Jazz Studies
Dana Library, 4th Floor
Newark, NJ 07102
(973) 353-5595

Jazz at Lincoln Center
www.jazzatlincolncenter.org



Jazz at Lincoln Center

Jazz at Lincoln Center is the world's largest not-for-profit arts organization committed to promoting the appreciation and understanding of jazz through performance, education, and preservation. With its resident orchestra, the world-renowned Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, and a variety of distinguished guests, Jazz at Lincoln Center celebrates and advances this distinctly American art form by producing a wealth of programs for audiences of all ages. These include concerts, national and international tours, lectures, film programs, master classes, student and teacher workshops, residencies, recordings, publications, television broadcasts, a Peabody Award-winning weekly radio program, an annual high school jazz band competition and festival, a band director academy, and a jazz appreciation curriculum. Under the leadership of Artistic Director Wynton Marsalis and Executive Producer & Director Rob Gibson, Jazz at Lincoln Center will produce more than 450 performances, educational events, and broadcasts during its 2000-01 season — its 10th season as a year-round producer of jazz programming. Currently, Jazz at Lincoln Center is building its new home — Frederick P. Rose Hall — the first-ever education, performance, and broadcast facility devoted to jazz, which is scheduled to open in 2003.

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The Louis Armstrong Educational Foundation, The Irene Diamond Fund, Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation, Danny Kaye and Sylvia Fine Kaye Foundation, Lindemann Education Fund, National Endowment for the Arts, National Public Radio, The City of New York, The Council of the City of New York, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, Edward John Noble Foundation, PepsiCo Foundation, Fan Fox and Leslie R. Samuels Foundation, Jack and Susan Rudin Educational and Scholarship Fund, and the Surdna Foundation.

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All photos courtesy Louis Armstrong House and Archives/Queens College unless otherwise noted.



"Jazz is played from the heart.
You can even live by it. Always love it."
—Louis Armstrong



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Wynton Marsalis, Artistic Director
Rob Gibson, Executive Producer & Director

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New York, NY 10023-7999

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